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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 QUITO 001680

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TAGS: [SENV](#) [EFIS](#) [PHSA](#) [PGOV](#) [UNESCO](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: CORREA LEGALIZES "INCIDENTAL" SHARK FISHING

Classified By: DCM Jefferson Brown, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On July 20 President Rafael Correa signed a declaration legalizing the sale, transport and export of shark "caught incidentally in the catch of other fish." Political observers have called the move an effort to shore up votes from coastal fishermen in the upcoming September elections for the Constituent Assembly. Environmentalists see it as a loophole in the law that provides cover for shark fin traffickers. They estimate that most shark fins harvested in Ecuador come from the Galapagos Islands, where incidental shark catch is nil due to small scale artisanal fishing. Demand for shark fins in China and Japan is high, and the current black market price per fin ranges from \$20-\$100. The decree comes fifteen days after the Ecuadorian environmental police signed a five-year training accord with the international environmental group Sea Shepherd to improve efforts to crack down on wildlife trafficking. End summary.

¶2. (U) The sale and export of shark fins has been illegal in Ecuador since President Lucio Gutierrez declared a moratorium on shark fishing in 2004. The decree signed by Correa and the Minister of Agriculture on July 20 in Manabi overturns the 2004 law, but only for shark bi-catch (shark caught accidentally in the catch of other fish). Environmentalists believe, however, that the decree provides cover for indiscriminate shark fin harvesting, for export to China and Japan via Peru. Correa said he hopes to help 200,000 families in the politically important coastal provinces by generating \$170 million in income per year. He added that the government would conduct a review in six months to determine whether shark fishing had increased "tremendously."

As such, political analysts speculate the move is designed to win votes in the Constituent Assembly scheduled for September. Artisanal fishing associations are delighted, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Espinosa told the press that the decision would "make the market for shark fins more transparent" and that "profits from shark fins would now go directly to fishermen, cutting out intermediaries and traffickers." However, Minister of Environment Ana Alban declined to comment on the president's decree, and late on July 20 said that she had not even seen the text.

¶3. (U) Coincidentally, the Latin American Human Rights Association, along with the activist international environmental group Sea Shepherd, two weeks ago signed an agreement to train Ecuador's environmental police in identifying wildlife traffickers operating in the Galapagos Islands. In those two weeks, police made eight arrests and seized 20,000 shark fins and 90,000 sea cucumbers.

¶4. (SBU) Paul Watson, the Canadian/American Director of Sea Shepherd, estimates that roughly 80% of shark fins harvested in Ecuador come from the Galapagos, and not from larger coastal fishing operations, since coastal shark populations

have been vastly decimated in the last 30 years. There is virtually no shark bi-catch in the Galapagos Islands -- fishing operations there are artisanal and use small boats. Watson said that most sharks caught in the Galapagos are obtained through the use of baited "long lines" that are heavily buoyed and float freely in the water (Sea Shepherd recently encountered a long line 35 miles long). Watson said the Ecuadorian navy consistently denies Sea Shepherd,s requests to search for long lines, and that subsequent to the presidential decree, they gave the group until July 28 to depart the Galapagos and denied any extension of their time there. Watson, the environmental police and the GNP all allege that the navy is involved in trafficking of protected wildlife, and for that reason hinders Sea Shepherd,s efforts at tougher enforcement (the navy told the press it was not aware of the Sea Shepherd agreement, and is pressing for its cancellation as an unnecessary incursion into their responsibilities).

COMMENT

15. (C) The presidential decree provides an obvious loophole for shark fin traffickers. Working level contacts at the Ministry of Environment (MAE) -- clearly out of the loop on this decision -- were hesitant to discuss the measure, and called the situation "difficult." Enforcement of the anti-shark fishing law was already weak due to a lack of inter-ministerial coordination and the navy,s alleged involvement in wildlife poaching. Clearly, Correa is seeking votes in the central coastal province of Manabi, an area of traditional center-right party strength that he has relentlessly targeted since taking office. Environmentalists estimate there are 200,000 people -- not families -- working in the fishing industry, so the benefit could be

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substantially less than Correa predicts. Just one month after UNESCO,s declaration of the Galapagos as an "endangered patrimony," such a backward step seems to be a rather short-sighted campaign measure. End comment.  
JEWELL